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Solving very large distributed constraint satisfaction problems

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Solving Very Large Distributed Constraint Satisfaction Problems

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Peter Harvey

Bachelor of Mathematics

Bachelor of Computer Science

School of Computer Science and Software Engineering

2009

CERTIFICATION

I, Peter A. Harvey, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Computer Science and Software Engineering, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Peter A. Harvey
8 December 2009

Abstract

This thesis investigates issues with existing approaches to distributed constraint satisfaction, and proposes a solution in the form of a new algorithm. These issues are most evident when solving large distributed constraint satisfaction problems, hence the title of the thesis.

We will first survey existing algorithms for centralised constraint satisfaction, and describe how they have been modified to handle distributed constraint satisfaction. The method by which each algorithm achieves completeness will be investigated and analysed by application of a new theorem.

We will then present a new algorithm, Support-Based Distributed Search, developed explicitly for distributed constraint satisfaction rather than being derived from centralised algorithms. This algorithm is inspired by the inherent structure of human arguments and similar mechanisms we observe in real-world negotiations.

A number of modifications to this new algorithm are considered, and comparisons are made with existing algorithms, effectively demonstrating its place within the field. Empirical analysis is then conducted, and comparisons are made to state-of-the-art algorithms most able to handle large distributed constraint satisfaction problems.

Finally, it is argued that any future development in distributed constraint satisfaction will necessitate changes in the algorithms used to solve small ‘embedded’ constraint satisfaction problems. The impact on embedded constraint satisfaction problems is considered, with a brief presentation of an improved algorithm for hypertree decomposition.

Previously published work includes [HG03, HCG05, HCG06a, HCG06b, HCG06c].

This thesis is dedicated to
my dearest wife Emily,
my baby daughter Adelaide,
my parents Keith and Sandra,
and my siblings Sean and Danielle.
I love you. You mean the world to me.

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who helped me through these last years.

Two weddings, one divorce, and a beautiful baby...
who would have thought it would take this long?

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Terminology

Constraint satisfaction literature often uses the same term but with differing definitions. The following definitions will be used throughout this thesis.

complete	<p>The terms ‘complete’ and ‘incomplete’ will indicate whether concepts or methods cover all possibilities. An assignment is complete if and only if it provides values for all variables. An algorithm is complete if and only if it provides an answer for all problems. Note that we are using ‘complete’ in the general algorithmic sense, and not to indicate that a constraint satisfaction algorithm considers all possible assignments.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> A solution must be a complete assignment.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Breakout is an incomplete algorithm.</p>
consistent	<p>The terms ‘consistent’ and ‘inconsistent’ will refer to simple tests that can be conducted with available information. The most common instance of this in constraint satisfaction is to say that a particular combination of values is consistent/inconsistent with the set of constraint. If necessary, an algorithm may redefine what it means to test an assignment for consistency.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> The assignment is first tested for consistency.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> The current assignment may still be inconsistent.</p>
feasible	<p>The terms ‘feasible’ and ‘infeasible’ will refer to more complex determinations made by an algorithm during its execution. This is most often used in constructive search algorithms once they prove, by exhaustive search, that a partial assignment of values to variables cannot be extended into a consistent assignment for all variables. Note that an assignment is feasible if and only if it is a subset of a complete consistent assignment.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Nogoods record which assignments are infeasible.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Let T be the set of all feasible assignments.</p>
solvable	<p>The terms ‘solvable’ and ‘unsolvable’ will refer to whether or not a constraint satisfaction problem has a solution. A solution is a complete, consistent assignment of values to variables. By definition, an unsolvable problem has no feasible assignments.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> If $E = \emptyset$, we can conclude the problem is unsolvable.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Breakout search is only suitable for solvable problems.</p>

Formal Notation

Formulas, algorithms and proofs will attempt to use a consistent lettering and numbering scheme. When no additional information is provided, the following definitions should be assumed.

$\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{C}, \mathcal{D}$	The symbols \mathcal{V} , \mathcal{C} , and \mathcal{D} respectively refer to the variables, constraints, and domain of a given problem. If more than one problem exists we will subscript related symbols according. For example \mathcal{V}_1 , \mathcal{C}_1 and \mathcal{D}_1 .
V, C, D	The letters V , C , and D will refer to <i>subsets</i> of \mathcal{V} , \mathcal{C} , and \mathcal{D} respectively.
s, t	In most instances the letters s and t refer to assignments. An assignment is a function mapping some subset of \mathcal{V} to \mathcal{D} . They should not be assumed to be complete assignments (mapping <i>all</i> of \mathcal{V} to \mathcal{D}) unless explicitly stated.
\hat{s}	We use \hat{s} to denote the set of variables assigned values by s . Formally, if $s : V \rightarrow \mathcal{D}$ then $\hat{s} = V \subseteq \mathcal{V}$. Due to the nature of many constraint algorithms, we will assume that there exists an ‘order of assignment’ for \hat{s} , and will define the symbol for this order as needed.
$s \downarrow_V$	We use $s \downarrow_V$ to denote the assignment s projected on to some $V \subseteq \hat{s}$.
\mathcal{S}	The symbol \mathcal{S} refers to the set of partial assignments for a problem. Note that it does include all complete assignments $s : \mathcal{V} \rightarrow \mathcal{D}$, and the empty assignment $s = \emptyset$.
c	In most instances the letter c is used to refer to a constraint. A constraint is seen as a mapping from the set of assignments to a value T or F. If necessary an index such as i or j may be applied to differentiate between constraints. For example, $c_i, c_j \in \mathcal{C}$.
\hat{c}	We use \hat{c} to denote the scope (set of variables) of a constraint c .
$c(s)$	We use $c(s)$ to denote the evaluation of an assignment $s \downarrow_{\hat{c}}$ by the constraint c .
u, v, w	In most instances the letters u , v and w refer to variables. If necessary an index such as i or j may be applied to differentiate between variables. For example $v_i, v_j \in \mathcal{V}$.
d	In most instances this symbol is used to refer to a value. If necessary an index such as i or j may be applied to differentiate between values. For example $d_i, d_j \in \mathcal{D}$.

Pseudocode Notation

Algorithm pseudocode in this thesis will use some keywords and notation beyond the usual ‘if’, ‘for’, ‘while’ and ‘break’. These are presented below, along with a standardised interpretation for other common keywords such as ‘set’ and ‘let’.

algorithm, procedure	The label ‘algorithm’ is used to refer to the main function of a constraint satisfaction algorithm. Component functions such as backtracking and computing nogoods are labelled ‘procedure’ and are numbered accordingly.
when	<p>The term ‘when’ is used to model event-driven programming commonly found in distributed programs. It is assumed that the program pauses at the beginning of a ‘when’ block until one of the conditions is satisfied, and will not exit the ‘when’ block until none of the conditions are satisfied.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> when an assignment $v \rightarrow d$ is received from a neighbour</p> <p><i>Example:</i> when some random amount of time t has passed</p>
let	<p>The term ‘let’ is used to declare variables, often stating their intent and initial value. This is often also used to declare constants, or to define useful terms to simplify formulas.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> let V be a set of variables, initially empty</p> <p><i>Example:</i> let v be the variable most recently added to \hat{s}</p>
set	<p>The term ‘set’ is used to modify variables, describing the new value that they will take. This is most often used to modify functions, but also can be used in other circumstances.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> set $s(v)$ to a value consistent with the assignments in t</p> <p><i>Example:</i> set N to $N \cup \{n\}$</p>
unset	<p>The term ‘unset’ is used to give a variable <i>no</i> value. This is most often used to remove a particular mapping from a function. Note that ‘unset V’ is different from the ‘set V to \emptyset’. That is, if V is unset then $V \neq \emptyset$.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> unset $s(v)$, for all v appearing in \hat{c}</p> <p><i>Example:</i> unset the eliminating explanation $e(v, d)$</p>
'	The decoration ‘ $'$ ’ is used only in algorithm proofs, and not in algorithm bodies. It refers to the <i>next</i> value of a variable. For example, if s refers to the current variable-value assignment, then s' refers to the variable-value assignment after one step or iteration of the algorithm.